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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the development and evolution of the French for Business undergraduate language course at Oregon State University, focusing on: (1) instructor preparation; (2) course structure; (3) course content; (4) the business student as teacher and mentor; (5) cultural exchanges with French-speaking business students; (6) oral and written communicative activities; (7) textbooks and supplemental materials; (8) problems encountered; and (9) new course goals. The course is designed for business students who have completed two years of French language instruction, but is open to any major. Students are required to learn basic information and vocabulary about the French economy, the European Community, the stock market, banking, buying and selling, and simple accounting. The students discuss topics collected from French newspapers and magazines, present oral reports, conduct case studies, and write business letters and resumes. The main problems faced by the instructor included not having had a business course at the college level, the range of student language levels within the class, and the increasing number of students taking the course. (MDM)

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FRENCH FOR BUSINESS: A Case Study

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The French for Business course (originally Français commercial) was introduced into the third-year curriculum at Oregon State University in 1984 in response to the increasing emphasis on making programs interdisciplinary and on "internationalizing" the university. The number of students pursuing a degree in international business was growing; consequently, the number of students pursuing a minor in French was also increasing. Other universities and schools had already begun teaching business French, and textbooks in Business French had begun to appear on the market. Since I had had experience in the American business community, the timing was right and the elements were in place to initiate a course targeted at students of international business but which would also be open to other students at that level, thus bringing together the disciplines of French and business.

Eight years later, and after many trials and errors, what is evolving is a student-centered course where the content is business and where the principal focuses are communication and "taking care of business." In this presentation, I will cull from this eight-year study to address the following areas: instructor preparation; course structure; course content; the business student as teacher and mentor; cultural exchanges with native French business students; oral and written communicative activities; textbooks and supplemental materials; problems encountered; and new goals.

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Instructor Preparation

Having had a background in French language and literature but never having had a course in American business practices, I was faced with the formidable task of preparing myself to teach material for which I had never had any formal training; therefore, the context in which

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I would be featured as an authority seemed "foreign." Not only would I have to learn more about business in general, both American business and French business, but I would also have to learn to teach the material. Creatively teaching subject matter for which one has had adequate preparation is a difficult and challenging task in itself; teaching material while learning it is overwhelming. Added to this lack of instructor preparation was the task of finding an appropriate focus to make the course meaningful-- contextually, culturally, linguistically, and intellectually-- to a class made up of both business students and non-business students.

To prepare myself to teach my first course in French business, I read widely about business practices in France and the United States, concentrating primarily on the aspects of business that were featured in the few business French texts that were available at the time. I also engaged a French business student as my proctor and informant, with whom I spent many hours discussing French business practices.

When I faced the first class of "Français commercial" in 1984, I was very uneasy and not at all convinced that I wanted to teach it. Good fortune came my way that quarter: the class consisted of nine business majors and one French major, all of whom were enthusiastic, bright students and who were grammar-weary and ready to talk about what they were doing or about anything other than grammar. Consequently, when the non- business student asked that a concept be explained, the business students were usually eager to show what they knew; I let them give the explanations, whenever possible. Also, since at that time, there were adequate funds in the budget for tutors and proctors for the advanced students, I hired several French students of business to discuss certain French business concepts with the students, principally the banking system, the postal accounts, the educational preparation needed to enter into management in

France, the stock market, and import-export. My role in the class was that of facilitator: I encouraged participation; corrected errors; gave vocabulary words as needed; added cultural notes; corrected homework; and wrote and corrected exams. At the end of the term, I had learned more about business from the students, both American and French, than they had learned about business from me; however, in making the course student-centered, I had stumbled onto a methodology that has remained with me until the present--featuring the students.

Course Structure

French for Business (Fr 315) at Oregon State University is a third-year, three-hour course for which the prerequisite is Second-year French. It is taught once during each academic year and is open to students from all disciplines as an upper-division elective. The majority of the students who take the course are business majors who are pursuing a minor in French. Students earning a minor in French have the option of substituting this course for Fr 313, the required third-term course in the third-year language sequence. Majors in French do not have this option, but, increasingly, French majors are taking the course as an elective. Within a given class, there might be students who have just completed their second-year program and students in third- and fourth-year programs. The course meets for two 75-minute sessions per week rather than for three 50- minute sessions per week because we were aware that most business classes have a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule and therefore the business students are more likely able to take the class if offered on a Tuesday-Thursday schedule.

Course Content

The business students have no difficulty understanding the content; for them, it is usually a question of mastering the vocabulary in French and in learning how business practices in

France differ from or resemble those in the United States. But the business content can be frustrating for the non-business students, for these students are faced with learning a language for something which is foreign to them, business, which they must then communicate in another foreign language, French. For several quarters, I grappled with the problem of finding a focus which actively engages all students while giving to each one, regardless of specialty, a place of importance in the course. Also, due to the time constraints of one quarter, I have had to choose which areas of business to stress and which to eliminate.

To this end, I have narrowed the content of the course to deal with those aspects of business for which all the students have a point of reference and which could apply to their own lives, culturally and practically, if they were living in France. All students are required to learn basic information and vocabulary relating to the following: the French economy; the Common Market; types of businesses in France; the P&T and how it works; buying and selling; marketing; buying and selling; publicity; the stock market; simple accounting; and import-export. Some of these areas are stressed more heavily than others, depending on the makeup of the class; however, the most important focus for the students is that which is placed on "taking care of business" in some practical situations. They learn: how to use the bank; how to talk on the phone; how to write a business letter which is appropriate both in language and in form; how to conduct themselves in a business setting (i.e., how to avoid certain "faux-pas" caused by cultural differences); how to ask questions appropriately. how to discuss and argue issues calmly and politely.

Oral and Written Communicative Activities

Students like to speak French, and they particularly seem to enjoy discussing areas where

they see contrasts in the French way and the American way of doing things. They are curious; they have questions; therefore, I let them talk. They relate to each other what they are learning; they ask and answer the questions from the text or questions that I have prepared; they do case studies related to a given topic; they make decisions on issues presented to them; they compare and contrast; they debate issues; they critique; they do cued dialogues and, occasionally, spontaneous role playing.

Each day a student or a group of students is responsible for presenting either the new material or the content of an article from the text of a French newspaper or magazine. Following the presentation, the other students may ask questions. I include a place on the syllabus for the name(s) of student(s) presenting. In assigning the reports, I choose topics to relate as closely as possible to the student's specialty. For example, a Home Economics major might be asked to do a report on the textile industry in France; a French major was asked last year to report on the French people's reaction to the EuroDisney Center. An accounting student might report on profit and loss, and so forth.

Also, on most days there is also either a case study, cued dialogues and/or oral reports relating to current business matters in France, and occasionally the students do spontaneous role playing. Another very successful oral activity is the debate. Last year we debated topics such as: "The Working Mother" and "Publicity: Does It Inluence What You Buy?" These activities keep the students in front of the class instead of the instructor. Not only are the students involved, but they also seem to enjoy being featured. In fact, on evaluations, students suggest more ideas for debate; they ask for even more oral activities; and many have said that the course should be extended to two or three quarters so as to have more opportunity to engage in

interchanges of this type.

Similarly, written activities are designed so as to feature the student. In the beginning years of this course, I placed a strong emphasis on writing business letters relating to a specific business problem and on filling out forms, mainly because this was the bent of the text we were using. Students in this course no longer fill out forms nor do they write business-specific letters. Instead, they apply for an internship, reserve a room, order a book, a magazine or a catalogue, pose a complaint, write a letter of recommendation, request a telephone installation or some type of repair service, excuse themselves for an error they have made in a payment, etc. In other words, the concentration is on types of correspondence that any student might need to write at some time if living in France, not necessarily working in France--correspondence which applies to those business transactions which are a part of daily life. Letters are treated as compositions and are perfected as if they were going to be mailed. In some cases, the students have actually sent their letters: one student applied for a job with EuroDisney; one ordered a gift for his father from a catalog; another ordered a French magazine; another wrote to a French school for information regarding a summer program; an engineering student applied for an internship in Paris.

In addition to letter writing, I have introduced "writing-for-learning" activities into the program. These are very short, non-graded writing exercises which are done in class or as a part of exams. For example, I might ask: "What questions arose in your mind as you studied this chapter?" or "What differences did you note in the French way and the American way of doing...? On the final exam last year, I asked: "What did you learn that is or will be important, useful to you in your career/life?" The students like these writing activities; the exercise gives

them practice in expressing themselves, without penalty, and encourages them to use the new vocabulary with which they are and have been working. Students tend to write better when writing about their own feelings, impressions. etc. feelings, impressions, etc.

Business Student as Mentor or Teacher

As during the first class in 1984, the business students continue to serve as teachers and mentors to the non-business students. If the class is studying marketing, a business student with an interest or specialty in marketing prepares the content for presentation to the class. He/she is expected to play the role of the instructor by outlining and developing the major points of the lesson and by answering any questions which may follow. The business students are asked to report on topics such as banking and finance, marketing, types of businesses, accounting, the stock market, and import-export, whereas the non-business students are asked to report on areas such as publicity, office decorum in France, the Minitel-- in other words, areas which do not require specific knowledge of business. Whenever there are case studies to prepare, in so much as possible, a business student is paired with a non-business student. As they work outside of class on the presentation, the business student serves as mentor to the non-business student and each student has a phone number to call in the event he/she is having difficulty or needs someone to talk to about an assignment. Students are encouraged to speak in French even on the phone.

Cultural Exchanges with Native French Business Students

Whenever budget allows, I also engage native French speakers, exchange students who are specializing in either business or economics and who are studying either of these fields in the U.S., to meet once a week with the students in small groups in a café near campus. The

topics that are discussed each week follow what is being treated in the classroom; however, the French students are instructed to let conversation go where it naturally goes and to assist the American students in developing their language skills. This interchange gives the students the opportunity to engage in informal conversation, using business as the content, in a real-life setting, the café, and, most importantly, to make cultural exchanges with native French persons who have first-hand knowledge of or experience in the business community in France. The Café French program has been very successful; in fact, perhaps it is the most significant part of the course to the American students. Unfortunately, due to major budget cuts in the state of Oregon, this part of the course can not take place unless I find French students who want to volunteer their time in order to speak with American students.

Textbooks and Supplemental Materials

The "perfect" textbook has not materialized. Although I continue to look, I have found none to date that serves my purpose better than French for Business, by Goff, principally because of the dialogues which are easy to read and comprehend and which highlight important terminologies and give cultural contrasts. The text serves as the common base for the basic information and vocabulary. In addition to the text, I use a large amount of supplemental material: hand-outs regarding business types; the stock market; Supply and Demand; case studies; cued dialogues; overhead transparencies to show samples of good and bad correspondence, to teach French punctuation, and to give proper telephone language; copies of articles from French newspapers and magazines; publicity.

Problems Encountered

I have already addressed the problem caused because of the instructor's lack of

preparation. Related to that is the lack of that important ingredient--collegial input. I am the only one in my department who teaches or is interested in teaching French for Business; therefore, I have no one with whom to discuss my curriculum or from whom to get new and different ideas.

Another significant problem has been dealing with the range of language levels possible in a given class. Since we have moved the course to spring term so that the business students may take it as the last third of the language sequence, much of this problem has been alleviated; students are generally afraid to take the course if they have not had any French for two quarters. The French faculty in the department's French Section is also considering the possibility of changing the prerequisite to Fr 312 (i.e., second-term of third-year), or two quarters of third-year language, in order to assure that this problem doesn't present itself in the future.

Yet another foreseeable problem is the increasing number of students. If I am forced to teach a class of 25-30 students, the character of the class will change. Last year, I had planned for 10-12 students; there were 20. The result was that we were able to do fewer individual oral activities. If the numbers continue to grow and no extra monies are allocated to allow for an additional section of the course, this could conceivably be a problem of extreme concern.

New Goals

Future goals include: use of video, which I am procuring from the Chambre de Commerce; business news via satellite; interviews of French business persons; visit to a French business. I am also planning to make the CEE a principal focus when choosing articles. The course is ever-changing; it will develop with the new materials and the new technology, for it is business, it is language, it is culture.

In general, the reactions to the French for Business course have been extremely positive. Students are both proud and shocked that they have mastered 300-400 new words and expressions; they have had the floor for one term and have therefore had extended practice in oral and written communication; they have learned how to take care of daily business in France; and they have grown in cultural awareness and experience. Whether in business, in French or from another discipline, students are viewing this course as a practical experience, or even a necessary one.

A French major who took the French for Business course before going to France to study wrote me that the course had made her better prepared to deal with living in France, and that because of what she had learned, she had had the courage to volunteer her services in a small French business. A business major/French minor, who took the course after having returned from a year of study in France, wrote on her course evaluation that she would have been better equipped to live in France had she taken the course before going there and, furthermore, that she felt the course should be required of all students who were planning to work/study/live in France. A student who did a summer internship in a jewelry shop in Paris related to me that she had avoided some cultural "faux-pas" because of what she had learned and that she understood terminologies that she would not have understood had she not been exposed to French business language. An student who is minoring in French, commented to me that not only was she learning French business practices and French business language, but she was also using in this class what she was studying in her American business courses because of the attention given to comparison and contrast.

The number of students who take the course continues to grow. The new requirement

of study abroad experience for all language majors at Oregon State University and the recently added International Degree, which also requires a stay in a foreign country, may put this course more and more in demand because of its practical application. I had not anticipated its life span to be a long one, mainly because of budget problems, but French for Business is flourishing at OSU.

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